

Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP

Secretary of State for the Home Department
Home Office

Sent via email

3 July 2025

Dear Home Secretary,

Re. Impact of Immigration White Paper on international doctors

I am writing to raise the BMA's concerns regarding the proposed changes in the Immigration White Paper published on the 12 May, and their potential detrimental impact on international medical graduates (IMGs) and the wider health and care workforce.

IMGs are essential to the NHS, bringing diverse skills, knowledge and experience to the UK. It is the failure of adequate workforce planning that has resulted in an overreliance on recruitment from overseas, with the latest figures showing 42% of all licensed doctors are IMGs. While the Government is taking steps to address this issue, it is crucial that we continue to support international medical graduates currently working in the UK and ensure that future IMGs who choose to come here are welcomed and supported as essential contributors to our healthcare system. Recent research commissioned by the GMC found doctors are leaving the UK because they are put off by low salaries, the high cost of living and poor quality of life. Under the reasons to leave, respondents who qualified outside of the EEA cited systemic reasons, such as visa requirements (28%). We are concerned that the implications of some of the proposed changes will exacerbate this situation by creating further uncertainty and anxiety among IMGs, particularly those already practising in the UK, making it more difficult for the NHS to recruit and retain them.

Extension of the settlement period

The proposed increase in the qualifying time to obtain settlement from five to ten years will create unnecessary stress and uncertainty for IMGs and their families. We have already heard from members worried about the impact of this proposal, which effectively doubles the time it will take them to be free of visa restrictions. It is currently unclear whether the change would apply to those already in the UK, but if applied retrospectively, it would mark an unfair change to existing expectations, significantly impacting doctors, their families and their employers. It could also potentially discourage skilled IMG doctors from coming to or staying in the UK.

Having to shift to a ten-year settlement model effectively ties a doctor to sponsored employment for a further five years. Not only would this create additional uncertainty and stress associated with being beholden to visa restrictions, but it would place an additional financial burden on doctors who would have to pay the associated visa costs for both themselves and their dependents. Employers will also have to adhere to their monitoring and reporting obligations under the visa sponsorship rules for a further five years. The immigration process around GP sponsorship is already fraught with difficulties because of the unavailability of

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GP vacancies and the lack of GP practices who hold sponsorship licences. Any extension of the time needed for newly qualified GPs to be eligible for settlement will only exacerbate these problems. These changes may be the final straw for some GPs, pushing them to move out of general practice or leave the UK altogether. It does not make economic sense for the UK to invest money in training doctors only for them to not go on to practise in the NHS.

The white paper notes a potential exemption, stating that individuals can reduce the qualifying time to apply for settlement if they can show 'a real and lasting contribution to the economy and society'. The BMA strongly urges the Government to ensure doctors are included as part of this exemption.

Implementing Stricter Language Requirements

We are also deeply concerned about the proposed introduction of stricter English language requirements for adult dependents including spouses. The BMA has consistently highlighted the damaging effects of restrictive family migration policies on doctors' mental wellbeing, workforce retention, and their ability to care for dependent relatives.

We already know that having moved to the UK, some IMGs can feel isolated from their family and friends and tighter language restrictions will potentially heighten these feelings if they cannot be joined by their family members. It will also add a layer of complexity to a system that is already complicated and difficult to navigate. It is unclear what would happen in a situation where a doctor already in the UK needs to extend their visa, but their adult dependents fail to satisfy the higher standard of English required at this stage in the process.

Instead of making it more difficult for doctors to care for their elderly relatives whilst continuing to work for the NHS, we urge the Government to remove these restrictions for doctors and their families.

Immigration Skills Charge

The proposed 32% increase in the immigration skills charge will place additional financial strain on employers, including NHS Trusts and GP practices, which are already facing budget challenges. Further cost increases could compromise their ability to recruit and retain overseas healthcare workers, worsening existing workforce shortages.

Tackling the NHS workforce crisis requires effective workforce planning and a dual commitment to both investing in domestic training and retaining international talent by ensuring IMG doctors feel welcomed and supported. This must include tackling training bottlenecks, so UK medical graduates are not left in the unacceptable position of being unable to secure employment after completing their training. We must also continue to recognise, support, and invest in our international medical colleagues, who have long sustained the NHS. These doctors bring a wealth of skills, experiences, and cultural insight that enhances patient care and enriches clinical teams across the system.

For these reasons, we urge the Government to reconsider the proposed immigration reforms, which will create uncertainty and anxiety among international doctors, making it more difficult for the NHS to recruit and retain them. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these issues and our concerns further.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Tom Dolphin
Chair, BMA Council